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# Workplace resilience initiatives are on the increase in the current recession, but do they offer us a real way forward?

LSE British Politics and Policy Blog

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/surviving-work-resilience/>

*Policy debates about measuring happiness in the current climate sound like something from a bygone era when men didn't cry and women wore matching gloves. But the gloves are firmly off and we are now facing the harsh realities of work and the lack of it. As government and employers put their faith in resilience initiatives to get people into work it is worth asking if resilience is a concept fit for purpose. In her sixth and final article on public policy, work, and mental health **Elizabeth Cotton** argues that we already possess the key to survival; it's just a question of emancipation.*

Resilience responds to the voice that many of us wake bolt upright to at 4am asking how am I going to get through this? Resilience can be defined as the ability to cope with and adapt to difficult situations, a squaring up to life, something like guts or grit. The term comes from infant **development research** about why some children who have **experienced trauma** seem to get through it and others are subsequently unable to flourish.

Resilience is a fundamentally realistic concept that acknowledges the world as it is and the proposal that we have to adapt in order to survive it. **Adaptation** is quite literally my favourite word in the English language. It reflects our real beauty as human beings, that we are driven to get on with life despite its horrors, loves, hates, losses and betrayals. It is essentially iterative and not a character trait that people either possess or not – the 'Resilience-Tick' model. Rather it is something that is revealed and lost at various points in life, a life-long struggle and journey.

One of the reasons for this is that **experiencing trauma** and difficult situations can leave an emotional mark and a vulnerability to re-experiencing earlier feelings of fear and threat. Since our emotions are essentially bodily, these marks are like scars that leave behind a heightened sensitivity to further attack. This is commonly experienced as not being able to breathe, a racing heartbeat, dry mouth and loss of vision, even in the face of relatively benign events and situations.

When I'm scared it feels as if I'm driving a car and then suddenly my hands are off the wheel, my eyes are screwed shut and my mouth opens screaming. At its most acute it feels like I have totally lost control, losing sight of the fact that it's me that took my hands off the steering wheel. Resilience is about having the confidence to keep your hands on the steering wheel of your own life.

Resilience is a growing field because of the realities of recession, driven by resilience 'leaders,' mainly from the public sector but also from multinational companies such as British Gas, Allianz, and Nestlé. Most programmes use behavioural and cognitive interventions aimed at promoting individual skills, the most advanced formulation being the influential **PENN Resilience Programme** which has acted as a basis for much of the

training developed for both schools and workplaces in the UK. This positive psychology model is attractive in that it promotes the idea that optimism can be learned, and that happiness can be influenced through learning a set of skills and behaviours. The value of positive psychology techniques in a workplace setting is due, in part, to their simplicity and usability. They don't require a deep understanding of psychology nor the workplace by providers or users of these schemes.

The resilience and wellbeing industry is growing fast. There are hundreds of wellbeing and resilience courses and consultancies on the market, some as light as an online questionnaire as well as others that try to tackle deep rooted organisational conflict and managing dysfunctional teams. Most of these providers are themselves struggling to make money in a market that increasingly resembles the wild west. It's unregulated, un-moderated and lacking any real investment. The main consumers and drivers of resilience programmes, such as the NHS and the Department of Work and Pensions, have cut back their budgets. The only significant market expansion has been through the eighteen private companies providing the national **Work Programme scheme**, although they are **unlikely to reach** their own demanding targets. This is hardly a resilient sector, but one where we will see the emergence of high quality providers and hopefully the development of a collaborative community of resilience practitioners.

One of the difficulties in establishing a new field like resilience is how to build a concept that is credible to both employers and employees. In some striking ways, resilience at work is the new **corporate social responsibility** (CSR), a field that has grown rapidly over the last fifteen years but now faces a struggle for its own survival because of credibility issues in the face of hard global realities like climate change and migration. Credibility, in the case of CSR, rests on factors such as the values that underpin it, how it's measured, its scope and the effectiveness of the methods used to promote it. Like CSR, the resilience industry has started with a real need both for employees and employers. We're seeing 'bottom line' research into the costs to employers of not addressing wellbeing at work and the cost benefits to productivity and reduction in costly conflict and absenteeism. Unlike CSR, which has established an internationally agreed set of measurements in the **Global Reporting Initiative**, there are as yet no established set of resilience indicators. For the purposes of this blog I am going to use the imprecise measurement of whether people feel able to keep their hands on the steering wheels of their lives.

This is where I think many existing workplace resilience programmes stand to fail. There is something strangely disempowering about many workplace resilience schemes and it's something to do with the resilience paradox. Last week a woman came to see me about taking a course I run on resilience at work. She asked me if the fact that she had lost her job three months ago meant that she wasn't eligible. This woman is an expert in resilience but she thought she had already failed. So what is at the bottom of this resilience paradox? I'm not sure how sensible it is at this point to draw on the words of Bananarama, but it's not what you do it's the way that you do it.

Not wishing to revive a long-dead **contentious discussion** about different psychologies or a false choice between cognitive behavioural therapies, positive psychology and psychodynamic approaches, one of the problems with workplace resilience schemes is that they can easily look like a social realism campaign. Your workplace needs you! Eat breakfast and you can produce twice as many widgets for the empire! I'm not against breakfast, and we should be angry that 1 in 8 school breakfast clubs have been cut this year, with the 50 per cent of remaining clubs are **under threat**, but what we do know is that "nanny" messaging by employers has at best no impact and at worst a negative effect.

That is because it removes the individual from being in the driving seat of their own resilience.

Resilience is knowing that what you are is enough. It's not about lacking anything but rather liberating something from within. I'm tempted to call this Radical Resilience™ but the use of cheap labelling might actually undermine the very political point I want to make here. So bear with me on a journey back to the 1970s which was agreeably responsible for some crimes against hair and fashion but more importantly for the creation of emancipatory education.

Emancipatory education methods, based on the writings of the liberation theologian **Paulo Friere** and adult education movements in Germany and Scandinavia, provide the framework for trade union and adult education world-wide. Emancipatory learning has been formulated and reformulated by different practitioners over the last thirty-five years (principally by the hundreds of highly innovative trade union educators working since the 1970s) but all rely on some basic principles. Firstly, all learning starts from the experience of the participants and focuses on the real problems that they face. This sounds obvious but I have rarely seen a workplace resilience programme that actually asks people to articulate in their own words what the problem is. This is a real mistake and might account for the numbing effect of some resilience programmes, which leave people completely uncompelled to raise an eyebrow over their own survival. It just doesn't hit the spot. Emancipatory methods are collective and designed to allow sharing of ideas between people and not just between teacher and student. We are missing a trick if we think that an overworked human resources manager/ teacher/ trade union rep/ mental health practitioner has all the answers. The experiences of other people who have overcome real problems in life is probably one of the most important learning experiences anyone can have. We learn from people who have the authority of having experienced and survived trauma, including the workplace variety. Our confidence is raised when we recognise that we are capable of solving our own problems. The failure to address our problems is less a lack of education or technical know-how, rather a lack of recognition that we can do the driving ourselves.

The methods used in workplace schemes need to be consistent with this central objective of empowering the individual (what is sometimes called agency or self-efficacy) and increasing her capacity to take control over her life and mental states. This means that if workplace resilience schemes do not help to address the internal sound track that says 'I'm not enough' then they provide a false sanctuary where 'following doctor's orders' means you'll be okay. An apple a day. Although we know having a fruit bowl at work can improve concentration it is unlikely to empower people enough to recognise that they can make really good decisions about how to live.

This **series of blogs** has tried to offer some ideas for surviving work, focussing on our ability to see reality in all its ugly glory, allowing ourselves to get angry about it but still try to understand it, learning to find help and relying on our relationships with others. We end the series championing the concept of resilience. Resilience was not invented to make us more productive, rather it is a very human capacity for getting through the hardships of life. It is a radical idea with huge emancipatory potential.

If this sounds a bit too ideological allow yourself to liberate your **own resilience** by drawing on your own and others' experiences. Ask someone today how they survive work and allow yourself to listen to the answer. You might be surprised at how empowering this is for both of you. And whatever you do, don't let go of the steering wheel.

